It was, Spock considered, something of a relief that the ownership of the disturbingly attractive slave had been settled; now, perhaps, the unsuccessful contenders would return their attention to the rigorous training that still lay ahead of them. His motives, he acknowledged, were purely selfish, for this graduation was important to him--the reputation he earned now would go a long way toward fulfilling his life's dreams.

S'Kandarai! The goal of every warrior, achieved only by the most worthy: to be chosen as lifemate by one of his equals, matched mentally and physically with a completeness possible in no other relationship, a companion to love and to honor, to share his life and death. But first he must prove his own worth. Already spoken of as the finest warrior of his generation, he was encouraged by the Warleader's promise of an invitation to join his own band of followers if, or rather when, he was granted initiation.

It seemed, though, that he was not to be allowed to forget the Human so easily. Savak's absence for the next two nights from the communal tent where the warriors ate together was noted and commented on, and the man certainly seemed very pleased with himself when he reported for duty, but he kept the slave confined within his tent. Even Satak joined in the speculation, but Spock held himself aloof. Slave the Human might be, but he had not chosen his state, and to Spock it seemed unbecoming that the warriors should gloat over his misfortune.

On the third day the entire camp was assembled to witness the punishment of a recaptured slave. It was known that escaped slaves of all races formed together into marauding bands, hiding out in the mountains and avenging their captivity by savage attacks on any Vulcan who came within their reach. They were dangerous, bloodthirsty killers who could never again be trusted, and if such a feral slave was retaken, he was always killed, both as a punishment, and as a warning to any of his fellows who might contemplate escape.

Spock watched impassively as the blue-skinned alien screamed vainly for a death that would not come for many hours. Had it been his decision, he would have killed the man quickly, for he did not believe that this example would truly deter any slave who wanted freedom badly enough, but it was the law, and he had sworn to uphold the teachings of his mentors.

Looking around, he saw that the camp slaves were huddled together close to the site of the execution. In the front rank he noticed the Human, who was staring directly at the suffering slave. Something about his unfocused eyes and white face convinced the Vulcan that he was not really aware of what was happening.

It seemed that another thought so, too, for the elderly slave who acted as overseer reached out and flicked the Human with his lash, breaking his trance-like state. The Human stared for a few seconds in utter horror, then turned aside and vomited helplessly. The overseer shook him roughly then turned him back, holding him so that he was forced to watch.

When at last the punishment was over, the bleeding, scarcely alive body was left hanging in its bonds. It would remain there until the skeleton fell to pieces, a warning and a reminder to any who passed that way. With relief, Spock turned his back on the macabre spectacle and returned to his tent.

It was sheer conincidence that only the next day Spock again encountered the Human. He had just returned from weapons practice, and feeling thirsty, he paused by the camp well to drink. Several slaves were drawing water, and he approached the nearest, aware of an unexpected pleasure when he saw it was the Human.

"Give me water," he commanded.

The slave obeyed, kneeling with his eyes respectfully lowered as he handed the cup. Spock drank frankly enjoying the sheer beauty of the youth at his feet, wondering if the fair hair was indeed as soft as it looked. Perhaps unnecessarily, he passed the cup back for a refill. Just as the slave offered the brimming cup a second time a warrior brushed heedlessly against him. The Human lost his balance and spilled the water over Spock's sandals.

"Careless one!" The overseer hurried up. "You will be beaten for this--report yourself to your master."

"Wait," Spock could not have said why he intervened--the youth must learn to accommodate to his masters, even when they were at fault, "there is no harm done. No doubt he will be more careful in the future."

"You are generous, my lord." The overseer bowed. "Thank the warrior, Human, you are fortunate to be spared."

"Thank you, my lord." The voice shook and the soft spoken words were scarcely audible.

Spock looked down curiously, wondering why the slave should be so grateful to have avoided what would have been only a mild punishment.

"Do not repeat the fault," he said firmly before turning away. Within moments he had forgotten the incident.

"Spock, will you join me?" Selon greeted his protege the next day. "I grow stale in camp and feel the need for a few day's hunting. Will you come?"

"Gladly." The younger warrior flushed with pleasure at this sign of his leader's approval--and at the chance to learn further from this renowned warrior and hunter. This was how it would be, he thought, when he had earned his own reputation. He would be sought out by men like Selon who would desire him as mate. Who would choose even the most beautiful slave over a full and equal relationship with one of his own kind? It was sheer chance, he told himself firmly, that as he turned in his saddle to wave farewell to Satak, the last thing he saw was the slim figure of the Human emerging from Savak's tent.